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Defense chief Weinberger launches public offensive against deep budget cuts

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On the eve of the official release of Reagan administration budget figures, it's back to basics on defense.

To fend off the growing army of congressional critics wanting to take a bigger chunk out of Pentagon spending, Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger has taken to the national airwaves to warn that such cuts would send the wrong signal to the Soviet Union as well as harm the US economy. He also promises that he will reorganize the defense acquisition system, a favorite target of Pentagon critics.

These three issues — national security, economic impact, and Pentagon management — are fundamental to the defense-spending debate. In raising them, Mr. Weinberger heads straight into the budget fray, taking on the growing number of Republican leaders in Congress who want to slow the rate of increase in defense spending as part of the effort to trim the federal deficit.

In raising these issues, however, the defense chief also leaves himself vulnerable to those who say the administration may be off the mark on all three counts.

In an address on Cable News Network Monday evening, Weinberger spoke of the Soviet Union's "relentless production of modern weapons." He stressed the production and deployment of intercontinental ballistic missiles.

But the CIA finds that Soviet military spending has flattened noticeably in recent years. This slowdown reflects a conscious Soviet decision to deemphasize strategic offensive weapons, according to a congressional expert, as well as "serious shortcomings in the area of basic military technology."

Richard Kaufman, assistant director of the Joint

Economic Committee, writes in the journal *Soviet Economy*: "Soviet performance is somewhat better in getting new technology into deployed systems, but here, too, it lags behind the United States. Soviet weaknesses in initiating and adopting new technology could become more pronounced as the trend toward increased sophistication of weaponry continues."

On defense and the economy, Secretary Weinberger says, "The President's program to rearm America clearly has not hurt our economy." He emphasizes the reductions in defense-spending plans already agreed to by the administration. Many lawmakers continue to insist that the Pentagon bear a

greater share of the deficit burden, and private analysis gives ammunition to those who say that the Defense Department's contribution so far has been minor.

For example, the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities finds that "the Weinberger reductions are an insignificant 2.7 percent reduction in planned budget authority over the next three years," and asserts that "contingency planning funds in the office of the secretary of defense could absorb this amount without affecting any programs at all."

Although the Pentagon in recent years has taken some important steps to improve defense management and make its large procurement operation more efficient, critics say much more needs to be done.

In response to such criticism, Weinberger announced Tuesday that he is "streamlining" the management of acquisition and logistics by creating two new assistant secretaryships. The purpose of the changes, he announced, is "to clarify responsibilities, strengthen controls, and provide emphasis for certain program areas which should receive additional attention."

In essence, acquisition management — including the controversial subject of spare parts — will be consolidated and (presumably) come under greater scrutiny by a single senior official. The actual weapons-procurement programs, which are handled by the military services themselves, will not be changed by this internal realignment.

In congressional testimony a week ago, Deputy Undersecretary of Defense Mary Ann Gillece acknowledged that "in any organization as large and complex as DOD [Department of Defense], there is always room for improvement."

At the same time, she added, "It is false economy to attempt to 'reorganize' your way out of problems."

For this reason, the Pentagon under Secretary Weinberger continues to resist the kinds of broader changes recommended by the President's Private Sector Survey on Cost Control (the Grace Commission) and by those — including many former senior uniformed officers and civilian officials in the DOD — urging a fundamental restructuring of weapons-procurement policy.

Such changes would raise questions about the necessity for specific programs and weapons, and perhaps force hard choices to be made.